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What Will Define Me?

My self-understanding is too turbulent to put into words. Interests have changed over the years, and it is hard to put all of my life experiences together. Friends have come and gone without any time to process change. Even my behavior is inconsistent. Each year has the feeling of another life, with minimal information staying in place and guiding me. Many times it feels like time is regressing. My parents have helped piece together my life story, but it still is fuzzy. Recently turning eighteen years old has been a struggle. Everybody I know expects to get a job, graduate high school, and go to college. My peers have followed their expectations, but I have not yet. But is that what I truly want? I do not know, but they told me it would benefit me later. Relationships are also crucial, with the crushingness of dealing with the unknown being too unbearable. The balance needed for me to grow as a person has not come yet. And as of now, I feel alone in my journey. Yet, despite the current uncertainty, some experiences and thought patterns can guide my essence and define who I am. Some of these things might be uncomfortable to discuss, but they are necessary to show your understanding of me. Each piece comes together to solve the puzzle that is me. By analyzing my early experiences, mistrust, past relationships, self-image, and overall stress, I will figure out how experiences and cognition form the temperament that I use to deal with the changing world.

Most people start as concepts, being conceived by their parents. They might be unaware, but the parents will play a significant role when the child comes. Luckily for my parents, they

knew that they had a second child. Two years older than me, my brother would have a younger sister. After nine months in the womb, my mother gave birth to me on March 18, 2004. My first few months were relatively uneventful since there was normal development. However, unlike other infants, I was developing out of order. I hit my physical milestones relatively on time, but my brain delayed my social-emotional development. It turns out that I was in the early stages of a neurodevelopmental disorder known as Autism. Signs of the syndrome manifested in the first few months of my life, including being slower to smile, laugh, and talk.

Autism probably does not defy maturation, the sequential development of behavior, but in my case, it has. And it started far earlier than one would expect. So, for example, by two months, a baby should be able to smile at other people gently (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). But instead, it took me almost until my third month to do so. According to my mother's baby book, I first smiled on June 8, 2004, nearly a month after expected. With this data in mind, my mother probably assumed that I was a stoic baby who only wanted to eat and sleep. Little did she know it would only get worse from there.

Like my older brother James, I showed the telltale signs of Autism from infancy. Born prematurely, he had less time to develop in the womb and have a healthy way of dealing with the environment. As a result, he also matured his social milestones far later than usual. But for me, my mother had an idea of what to expect since she already had some motherhood experience. As the months went by, I became more and more abnormal since milestones became unfinished while others were typical of my age.

Where I lacked the most compared to other infants would be the verbal communication realm. My first words came later than most infants since I did not say a word until around a year old. Unfortunately, the same baby book did not have an exact date, but my mother told me my first

word was “dada,” which most likely referred to my father. Since Autism affects the communicative realm, we can assume that my late talking stemmed from the same issue that affected my smiling and giggling. But we cannot believe that all autistics have the same problems; that would ignore the spectrum part of Autism Spectrum Disorder. But where we all unify is our awkward social growth. For most of us, Autism appears by age two. Some do not reach their milestones, while others usually mature until they stagnate (Psychology Today). I fell into the former category, which made my mother concerned.

Since my mother knew the signs of social delays, she sought out early intervention for me. Mom took me to the pediatrician, and they soon sought out an Autism diagnosis. By two years old, I started receiving enough therapy to feel like a full-time job. The type of therapy I got was Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), which focuses on improving specific behaviors with social skills, communication, reading, and adaptive learning skills (Psychology Today). Although I have no memories of going to this therapy, my mother claims that “I would not be in my place without it.” And she happened to be correct.

ABA involved therapists coming to my house multiple times a week to cultivate the skills needed to interact with the world. They mainly focused on my communication skills and transferred abilities from other aspects to my difficulties. ABA dominated my life for about a year and a half and set me up for preschool. Since the state considered me developmentally disabled, they enabled me to start school on my third birthday. The curriculum at school was similar to the home therapy, but I finally had a chance to interact with children similar in age. The occupational and speech therapists at school helped with my communication the most, along with the various paraprofessionals who truly cared about improvement. My peers had the same issues, but I do not know how much help they received outside of school. But for now, I can

assume that the ABA pushed me to develop my interpersonal abilities and flourish in a typical environment.

After spending a few years in extended preschool, kindergarten became less restrictive for me. There was still support in place, but I trailblazed against my peers. Then, finally, the teachers wanted me to transition to regular classes. And by the end of first grade, they allowed me into the mainstream. It was an entirely different environment, and I had to adapt. Everybody else seemed ahead, and it felt like I had never caught up.

When I first went to the regular classroom, the teacher's assistant heavily watched me. For simplicity, let's call her Ms. B. She always noted my "devious" behavior and pointed out something wrong. Often, Ms. B did not justify her frustration adequately and blamed me for her mistakes. One particular moment that stood out in my memory was a card incident. At the beginning of the year, the teacher gave out math cards to everybody else, not me, since I came in towards the middle. One day, the class played a game with the cards, and I told Ms. B that I did not have them. Ms. B looked at me with five heads and claimed that I threw out the cards. But how can I throw out cards that I never had? Why couldn't an adult take a child's perspective seriously? After all, she could have given extra cards and not complained.

As expected of an immature child, I needed to justify my point of view by harassing the woman. I told the assistant that math was a waste of time and "I would be an artist." Of course, Ms. B did not care, but at the time, my seven-year-old self felt that it was necessary to explain. After all, it felt like nobody else had to fight to get their way, especially in their childhood.

I have always wanted to have a peaceful life, but there are far too many obstacles to face, human or not. So many times, it feels like the world has constantly been fighting me, even if the environment did not present that way for others. Having innocence seems incredible at the

moment, but you become vulnerable to other people's judgments as time goes on. Unfortunately, Ms. B was not the only perpetrator in the mistrust spiral, and it would have been great if the conflict had ended there.

Although my parents have constantly supported me throughout the years, I cannot say the same thing about school. Students lacked understanding about Autism and assumed that I was an idiot. In addition, the teachers talked to me in a different tone than the rest. If I was not in class, then that meant that my flaws drew attention to me. I could only think about myself when I was younger. Time felt as slow as possible, and people had not gotten nicer. So after a while, I assumed it was my fault for being stupid and that people just caught onto it. But only a few peers seemed nice at school, but most of those relationships fizzled out since I did not crave intimacy.

One of them involved a girl in my third-grade class who used to talk to me during recess. I honestly do not recall much about her, but I remember going to her sleepover. My mother had to pick me up because she felt uncomfortable with me staying the night. Another friendship that I had lasted longer than the first, but it had more impact on my psyche. To be confidential, let's call this friend Gi. She played a massive role in my level of trust and abilities in interpersonal relationships.

Since puberty approached faster by the end of elementary school, my emotional state became vulnerable to my surroundings. There was a lot of ambiguity that was hard to catch up with within time. Different people, perspectives, and challenges popped up more than ever, and nobody seemed to provide security.

At the same time, the internet had entered my life, and it warped my view more than reality. Having the entire world in my hands felt unbearable, and I did not know what to believe from it all. Both negative and positive interactions came from my digital experience, but the

negatives stuck most. Scrolling back on my archives, I have found various examples of me being dumb online, especially on Instagram. Many of these incidents involved me not understanding the post's context and arguing with peers in the comments. The fears that I have had from them came true online, and it would be impossible for me to persuade them otherwise. But at the time, I honestly did not care who posted the content but about its essence. My mind automatically turned to information processing and not relations due to autistic hardwiring. Social media made me realize that attuning to the mood was natural, and my attitude would not get anywhere.

Thus I started to fluctuate between trust and mistrust. My peers were simultaneously well-meaning and belittling. There was no place in my mind to accept the ambiguity, so I became afraid that they would verbally abuse me. This conflict aligns well with Erikson's Ladder Theory, which begins at birth (Erikson). The first step on the ladder involves the skepticism I experienced. Having someone reliable to guide you would prevent things becoming less grey and separated into clear-cut blacks and whites. Without consistency, good and evil started establishing in my mind, and I did not know how to differentiate them. But I knew that was the "good" and that my peers were "bad."

These feelings prove that I have little trust in my peers. Since I struggled to look at the bigger picture, I assumed that everyone would behave similarly to my peers. And it sure felt like the world turned upside down; the typical childhood optimism steadily turned into pessimism, never returning.

Twisting my thoughts with a negative spin became automatic since I believed others would hold the same grudge. The constant access to the internet did not help those thoughts either. Becoming overwhelmed by the flow of information started my stimming, which are repetitive physical mechanisms to manage emotions (Raisingchildren.net.au). Some of my stims

include constantly blinking, pulling at my underwear, and slight throat clearings. The stims can change over time, but the blinking has stayed consistent.

Even if other people seemed unreliable, their input stayed inside my mind and guided my interactions. Being afraid of their potential judgment, I felt the need to rely on myself to problem solve. I did not realize that my peers were also going through immense psychological changes that influenced their behavior. At times, my lack of perception believed that I was the only one struggling with life and others breezed through. After all, why would I want somebody who knows nothing about me to provide support? They would not understand why my problems hurt, and that pain was inevitable for me.

But having this attitude did not mean it would be forever; I flip through opposites more than my clothes. For example, I yearned for comfort in my shoes and understanding from others, but I needed to sacrifice one of them before I found myself in relationships with people.

This theory is possibly a pseudoscience, but my childhood experiences reflect well with the Enneagram, a nine-point personality system that explains how one interacts with the world (Riso). My experiences led me to believe that the Enneagram six fits my thought behaviors the most out of the nine types presented. Being a six developed my problem with people, specifically figuring out who seemed reliable. People were far more complex than I had imagined, and I needed to see if they were okay. That does not mean present emotions do not matter in judging; it plays a significant role in determining my trust in new people. And with the closest relationships I had at the time mainly depended on their opinion. The balance needed to break the swinging was nowhere in sight.

Like the Enneagram, Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development also involves early childhood beliefs that shape one's life. In the first stage, a person must develop hope via

faith versus mistrust as an infant, but I believe it also applies to my prepubescent life, especially during fifth grade. Consistency mostly seemed to be in my life, but it was a swing between stability and instability. My mother cared for me a lot but outside felt deliberating, especially at school. There was nobody else to lean on for support; thus, I did not receive my emotional needs met all the time. Manifestations of my unmet emotions include bursting out in class since “nobody understands” and rebelling against the teacher for its sake. People did not react well to outbursts, and I was unsure how to stop being annoying. I had to question if it was my fault or somebody else’s. Finally, my prepubescent self decided it was other people and that I needed to be skeptical of them since they could have adverse reactions.

But with the Stages of Psychological Development, one can fail to complete a stage and have a reduced ability to progress through the others (Erikson). For example, I was unsuccessful in the trust versus mistrust stage. My lack of confidence in peers manifests far more than I think. Most importantly, it appears to be immense anxiety, fearing that others would not care if something went wrong. Being unable to read social cues made this problem worse because my peers could gesture anything, and I would not know due to my naivety. Other people’s judgments soon became mine, and reversing the thoughts did not pop into my head. I was too busy absorbing harmful opinions online. But we cannot say that my mother has nothing to do with my lackluster trust abilities; she discussed a lot about strangers. Being an information sponge, I sucked in my mother’s attitude and became fearful of unknown people. She had good intentions, but her words also played a role in my anxiety.

My skeptical toolbox followed me to middle school, where there were hundreds of strangers. Even if they were around my age, my peers at school were threatening. They had a vast understanding of the social structure that never made sense, and they made it even more

complicated by forming cliques. I realized cliques started late in elementary school, but they intensified in middle school. Unsure who to align me with, I hoped my friend Gi would be in my homeroom. In that case, we would spend most of our time together. If not, both would be lonely since we were our only friends.

The scheduling worked out, and Gi and I were in the same class. So we have a chance to develop our friendship further. An entire year with my best friend seemed like a comforting start in a new environment. Our lives felt defined by the moment back then. Thus I needed to have as much enjoyment as possible with Gi. The sixth grade would have been boring otherwise. I can say otherwise because I often relive these moments in my head and sometimes feel that 2015 and 2016 were the highest peaks of my life. Of course, it could be nostalgia, but my life seemed calmer back then. Here is how the mood changed in a highly descriptive way since I documented everything back then.

Being the same age, Gi and I underwent puberty simultaneously. Our minds went down different rabbit holes online, but we unified in class. I was very much a Roblox kid while she got involved in "deep" stuff. But both of us became defined by our obsessiveness from our interests. My gaming addiction eventually faded away, but I needed to fill the void with something else. Whatever Gi liked seemed ideal for me; thus, I absorbed her opinions.

I became more dependent on other people's opinions, especially those closest to me, on a universal scale. Since my life relied on others, I did not know how to use my judgment. Any minor inconvenience became unbearable and ended up in disciplinary action. One incident involved me irrationally attacking Gi since "I did not want to do gym." My parents had been concerned about my turbulence, but this incident was the final straw before psychotherapy.

At the same time, my relationship with Gi became more intimate since we spent far more time together. Gi frequented my house outside of school, and she always had something fascinating to share. Our other acquaintances at the time used to hang with us at an after-school recreation group, but Gi and I stayed the closest. By having them in my life, I also became involved with various fandoms, including Five Nights at Freddy's, Undertale, Homestuck, and Steven Universe. Their impact would not be as significant as the YouTube commentary community, which Gi and I avidly watched.

By the end of our sixth grade, we became inseparable at school. Lunchtime became a casual setting, and we even paired up on a school field trip to the Philadelphia Zoo. Gi even named one of the souvenirs I got. She played a considerable influence in my decision-making, even if it seemed trivial. The year's end seemed upsetting, but we knew we would hang out constantly during summertime. During our sixth year, the last thing we did was doodle collecting our experiences in a "yearbook."

An early example of her influence was an excerpt that I pulled from that yearbook. There was a section labeled "The Most Influential Person," Being the submissive person I was, I picked Gi without hesitation.

"The most influential person is Gi because she is the best person ever! Gi is such a good person once you meet her, and her presence makes me happy. Gi is so pretty, and I love her!"

Without considering the limited vocabulary, Gi spent considerable time in my thoughts. This presence would only grow in the following months since we had more time together. The words I used to describe Gi align well with the Peer Social Structure, which places the most emphasis on one's closest relationships (Guo). As I ventured out of our relationships, others had less influence. Our acquaintances played an important role, but our peers had little effect. The

internet was more of a motivation than the cliques. Even adults seemed more “cultured” than the average twelve-year-old. Having archetypes in my hands gave me an available script to figure them out but not worry. Half of the time we forget that other people went to our school. Gi was my everything, and one could even say that I revolved around Gi. Except that she was not my only preoccupation at the time, there was more to explore.

Like other teens in the mid-2010s, I had unlimited access to YouTube, and Tumblr was my main hangout, but the YouTube commentary community played a more prominent role in my psyche. Those people had judgmental views which infiltrated my thoughts. Anything popular immediately became flagged down as “cringe.” The most significant person in the commentary community was LeafyisHere, known for his snarky remarks about other popular content creators (Joon the King). He amassed millions of followers, creating a rabid fanbase that offended whenever their savior got hurt. His influence allowed me to see people as “stupid” and “cringe,” but Gi more so went down the unconventionality path.

With both of us learning to mistrust others, we became even closer. People became more overwhelming to deal with, and they did not offer anything interesting. The “popular” clique was the most guilty of being shallow. Neither Gi nor I wanted something superficial; there was more to life than talking about the latest drama. But Gi quickly played the non-conformist role while I struggled since I like a little of the “popular” stuff. Both Leafy and Gi spewed the “conventional is bad” rhetoric, but Gi further installed the mindset with direct interaction.

Over summer break, Gi and I spent a lot of time at a local water park. And if we were not there, Gi would text me about her journeys. Many of our discussions revolved around dissing others, especially their media taste. She especially hated the emo culture, which I leaned towards for music. Since I did not want to lose my closest relationship, I needed to comply with her

perspectives and not question her. Any type of conflict was not an interest of mine. After all, my life would only get worse if there was nobody I trusted.

It didn't matter if the public heard our stuff. Society expects us to lack self-awareness and introspection, which leads to awkward situations. These scenarios would often have the same roles, with Gi being the dominant and me submissive. Rarely would our presentations change? Perhaps they did, but we mainly stayed consistent with our behavior.

With Gi, she craved a romantic relationship with me. However, Gi always got touchy and feely with me and became hypocritical about public displays of affection. I was unsure about sexuality, and I did not know how people felt about intimacy. So I accepted my friend's love as more than friendship and started receiving the same sensations about her. Was it possible that I was a lesbian? Possibly but sex did not appeal to me, especially if it seemed so early in life. Bisexuality was also an option since I have had male crushes before, but I have not dated them. In retrospect, I might consider Gi my first girlfriend, but at the same time, it was primarily platonic.

Gi always took the first step within our relationship, especially with introducing physicalities. She desired to have me, even if we did not have the maturity to understand. Gi started her interest in me by grabbing my privates in the pool. We both enjoyed it, more so her than me. Other people were also with us, but they did not notice its subtlety. However, the next week felt weirder. Gi wanted me to come to the park's changing room and go in a shower together. Gi asked me to reveal my privates, and I did since she seemed genuinely interested in the moment. Nobody shared this level of interest with me before. And for the next few minutes, my mind contemplated if these feelings were okay or not.

I decided it was not okay. It might have gone against Gi's wishes, but I did not know how to deal with the sensual experience. Do people want this, or is it society telling them? What causes people to act upon each other? Does love even exist in the first place? These questions probably revolved in my mind when the occasion happened, but I still do not have an answer almost six years later. My conservative upbringing most likely contradicted the feelings we had. My parents were okay with a platonic relationship but would get uncomfortable with a lesbian one since LGBT deviates from the norm. Being neurodivergent probably made my parents lose hope. Why would they want another disappointment from me? How could I even handle opposition?

Compared to Gi, my parents had higher expectations for me. They were not absolute but felt skeptical about giving me freedom. How could I understand independence without a push? They fostered an environment where family plays a significant role. Not being obedient to them would get me in trouble, which happened a lot over the years. My mother did most of the disciplining since she stayed at home, but my father tended to be lax. If I did get in trouble, punishment would come, typically as internet privilege revoked. As much as I do not want to admit it, my mother can have an authoritarian parenting style regarding punishments (Brown). For the most part, my parents are flexible with me, although I sometimes fall flat with their expectations. If I do not follow through with them, I consider myself a failure. After all, having a set plan from your people does not allow for much decision-making.

My parents craved me to be a “well-meaning” person, but one cannot expect a hundred percent normality. Does an uncomfortable relationship make me break trust? Depending on the discomfort, yes. I did not want to make my mother feel uncomfortable; she expected me to report my problems. A well-meaning authoritarian can still allow the child to realize their weakness and

eventually develop poor self-esteem. Hiding them back would only make it worse. And I saw that with the incident, thus I told both my mother and Gi's mother. As expected from being tattled on, Gi became pissed at me until she realized that it was not a big deal. Our relationship would heal itself from the incident, but it would get more intellectual and less sexual.

We started discussing the music and films that Gi adored. Her favorite bands were Radiohead and Gorillaz. She gushed about the quality and depth of their music and dissed other musicians for catering to the mainstream. If other people at school knew about what she liked, then it was too "normie" for her. Gi could not tolerate being mundane; therefore, she wanted me to follow along in her quest to prevent any lame attempts in conversation.

And I tried to follow her desires, but she always had something to say about me. Since I was not her clone, I had a few interests that she critically held against me, especially in the musical realm. For example, Gi irrationally hated the band Twenty One Pilots and singer-songwriter Melanie Martinez, two of my favorites, because of their "fake deep" lyrics. She wanted me to spit on their merchandise at Hot Topic stores due to her feelings; I never did out of my respect. Since Gi harbored immense hatred for specific artists, I developed a fear that people would be equally judgemental and outcast me for having interests, which persists today.

Gi tied her bias to a campaign known as "Reject False Icons," which came from one of Gorillaz's music video promotions in the mid-2000s. As a giant fan, she absorbed the group's message into her mind and wanted to spread the word to me. Of course, being a naive twelve-year-old, I readily accepted her plan and soon began listening to Gorillaz on repeat. The band eventually became a significant talking point in our relationship, but she noticed that I held onto the "annoying" stuff.

One text message from my old phone shines this attitude: “You this summer: respect false icons, reject the icons.” Gi did not want to acknowledge that people can appreciate the known and the unknown without fussing. Conforming does not have to be a two-way street; interests will depend on the person. But she wanted me to fill her social void since I would be the closest person to her. People online with similar interests would not have the same emotions, but our peers would reject Gi. Even if Gi would not like to admit it, I can see our behavior molding into the Hipster Superiority Theory, which elaborates on how nonconformists like Gi use consumer goods to form an identity. Seemingly superficial, hipsters wish to find opposing perspectives to create a shock out of normals (Horáková 25). I am not sure if we are hipsters, but Gi tends to manifest countercultural attitudes and reflect them onto me. Popularity for us means mediocre, and the unknown is superior simply because fewer people understand.

As seventh grade started, Gi’s elitist attitude grew stronger until I could not resist. Her attitudes were mine but not vice versa. Sucking in the opinions was not rational, but how can a teenager use logic? After all, I still abided by other people’s rules since failure would have happened if not. If I do not trust myself, then why would I all my problems for me to solve? Wouldn’t that make the anxiety worse? Of course, it would even extend to our leisure, such as the weekly after-school recreation group. Since we started this tradition in sixth grade, Gi, a few acquaintances, and I have hung out in the library or outside. Our group mainly stayed contained, but that does not mean that we had no conflicts. I was the outsider in the group since I did not entirely comply with the “indie” stereotype. There was nowhere to fit in, but Gi and her clique seemed the closest to my ambiguity. I would be lonely otherwise.

One of these times struck me the hardest. It was a mediocre day in October 2016 that seemed to be going nowhere. Teachers talked their heads off, and I almost fell asleep in class.

But, when the time reached 2:10 that day, I knew recreation would be after day—finally, something to look forward to in the drudge. Gi and our acquaintances Ari and Ev would be there. Wondering what we would do seemed escapist, but it dragged me through the day.

It turned out that we would all draw, but comparing them did not come to mind. I tried to keep things lax and judgment-free, but they were more competitive about artistry. Being an amateur drawer did not help me since they claimed to be “experienced.” Why would you want to blame somebody for being incompetent despite one's abilities? After all, we are all on the same playing field. Your art cannot be better if you criticize others for the same effort. The meaning plays more into the enjoyment rather than artistic quality. One needs to realize their soul into their work, and it is evident that Gi only made art to feel “superior” to my lack of individuality. Ari held a similar attitude, but she was more willing to see the interpretation within the creation.

As implied, Gi and Ari went after me for my art. They claimed that my structure looked weird, and Gi even said that my people were “Adolf Nazi demons.” Simply, they thought my art looked atrocious. In retrospect, I can admit the art was terrible, but at the moment, it was insulting for the two to criticize the work without any sympathy. But they twisted the argument into a personality problem; that I had no soul for producing garbage. Gi went in on this fallacy and assumed that I was like the mediocre she had tried to avoid. A term I remember her using to describe me was “Basic White Girl.” Being mundane, I had little to no defining traits, and she had no reason to like me.

As a product of my environment, I combined Gi's “disobedience” with society's “uniformity.” As a result, it was difficult for me to continue my relationship with Gi, but I did not want to let her down. But seventh grade had far more peers than I considered “cool” than before. Therefore I met myself with an internal conflict, which would appear more in my future. Do I

make new friends with my interests, or do I develop my current relationship? It was challenging to figure out a balance between them, but I needed to separate the two for my sanity.

Gi's behavior stayed the same throughout the seventh grade while I tried to explore my peers in depth. Being in two different classes helped with the attitude, but I tried my best to keep up with Gi. She still significantly influenced how I interacted with others, with me making sure they were okay in Gi's eyes. However, the kids I fell for were nothing near Gi's expectations; I even had a crush on a "popular" kid. But nothing ever got intimate with my classmates, and Gi still dominated my social life. Almost nothing had changed beyond me getting involved with my artistic side.

Since Gi still held elitist values, she was quick to judge. But, especially with character, there was a clear right and wrong with acceptance. Although not explicitly said, many of her statements implied that she held herself higher than me. Gi did not think I would pick her on her cues, but I was not the braindead fool who followed her like a German Shepherd. I was far from a drone, and I needed to realize that I had my life. This realization did not come with a healthy reaction, but I would be happier now if it did.

Many of Gi's words exaggerated themselves in my mind, which led to some dwelling. I kept overthinking the implications of her monologues, and I think that she somehow became an inner judge. Gi tends to make harsh judgments that I fear might come true with her forming within. And with the negativity, I naturally gravitate toward problems, specifically mine. I consider these my "wrongdoings," and as a result, I get fixated on the things that are hard to fix. And these words truly hurt; the saying "the pen is mightier than the sword" is not enough to convey my agony. Things do not form specific memories in my mind, but they piece together a mindset that leads me down towards distress.

As much as I do not want to blame somebody else, I think that Gi's influence messed up my psyche the most. No simple pills or therapy healed my broken soul, but it needed a significant other to motivate me. Gi's metaphorical manifestation might seem exaggerated, but I feel that she still influences me. Even if Gi thought that she helped, all the implied negativity led my spongy self to absorb it. There were only too many times that she suggested that I was an idiot.

Even if relationships tend to have some conflict, my situation bordered on verbal abuse. One might consider abuse physically, but it can manifest in ways that do not involve visible bruises, including with words (Pace). For example, Gi engaged in taunting throughout the years, but her behavior only picked up after she started puberty. Nobody taught Gi that her words had consequences and that she had to handle me with care. After all, I grew up with more robust people, and reinforcing the message would lower my self-esteem into the abyss. Fearing that she would criticize me, I tried to withhold information, while she discounted my perspective whenever sharing. Gi only normalized closing in since she would be the first to say something about me. Having her constantly on my mind allowed me to disintegrate, especially in the least appropriate places.

My regression showed most in my social interactions, especially with those at school. The teachers caught my mood first, usually when I was daydreaming or complaining. Since I generally saw things in extremes, my attitude followed that principle to a T. Whenever they saw me in the wrong, and I assumed they targeted me and wanted discipline against me. As a result, I exhibited behaviors that I had in the first grade, which were inappropriate to begin in life. It did not matter if there were others around. I had to burst if things were wrong. Although selfish, I

knew these reactions were not right; my lack of emotional maturity and experience forbid me from making empathetic, rational decisions.

Gi's physical form also scared me since I knew she infiltrated my head. Most if not all of my convictions stemmed straight from her judgments. Although I was neither creative nor intelligent enough to understand her musings, my beliefs appeared authentic when dealing with the turmoil. Still, with a little retrospect, I can easily disprove my perception. But I cannot deny that my slant only caused trouble for everybody, including myself.

Although I described the frustration as frequent, it only manifested for a few days before menstruation. But it impacted the following days by its actions, specifically the explosive ones. My typical people-pleasing attitude could last forever, and something extreme inside had to burst. Too many stimuli and not enough empathy allowed for my behaviors to manifest. Lunch became the perfect place to let out my sentiments. Gi had to constantly hear all about my problems since she was the only person who would want to sit with me. But who would blame her for being annoyed? Nobody likes a pessimist.

With the hundreds of times we sat at lunch together, I became the villain. I started to whine about my daily problems since I did not trust anybody else to listen. It felt like pain acknowledging all the cons about myself, but it became more challenging to keep it in by the day. Finally, Gi only had a few options for the moaning to end: changing the conversation topic, leaving me behind, or talking to the teachers.

Many of my grievances against myself revolved around intellectual matters, especially with school's looming pressure. However, by observing my peers over time, I noticed that the smartest and probably best ones had the highest grades in school. Of course, it also did not help much that the school placed me in the accelerated math class, where these kids thrived.

Unfortunately, Gi was not in this class. Therefore, she interpreted this assumption that she was stupid and that I was not.

The inverse felt true at the moment since she had a comprehensive understanding of things that I would lack even if I tried—something about having more knowledge tied into one's character and overall intelligence. Nobody could compare to my shallowness. Who would even want to be the void? I did, and it sucked. Any grade below a 100 would not heal my conscious. If I did not follow through with my expectations of myself, I was an idiot. And I failed myself many times, even within a minute.

As much as I felt like a martyr, I was highly toxic to my friend. Even if she held traits that would sting, my bullets hit with far more force. According to an article from Psychology Today, there are four different types of these people. My kind happened to be “the Negative-Complaining Person” (Everly). The complainer never seemed happy, which was the case for me during the eighth grade. I appeared pleasant to others superficially, but my erratic behavior manifested in intense mood swings whenever close. Gi happened to be my victim even though much of my inferiority stemmed from her. The rest of my moaning manifested through bingeing videos about death and institutions, with me deserving those outcomes.

Since most of my behavior at the time relied on my self-worth, it would be best to provide some examples. Unfortunately, most of them revolve around incompetence and the inability to do things that everybody could. Reality did not give a contradiction to these thoughts since my mind ignored them. All I knew was that there was no way out of this agony. Various journal entries from this period paint this feeling than wordy analysis.

“I am so stupid; everybody else is more intelligent than me. Therefore I belong in an institution.”

“I am autistic, which makes me an inferior human being. Nobody wants to interact with a loser like me.”

“Nothing goes right for me these days.”

“I am a nobody compared to you, Gi.”

“What is the point of life? We are all going to die anyway.”

“Believe you cannot, and you are not even there.” (This one came from a planner that I had from eighth grade.)

“What a fool I am. Nothing could even change this state.”

“My life looks like garbage. Just kill me.”

“I want to die, and this stuff is too much to handle.”

Although false, my mind believed that all of my previous happened to be true by looking from another perspective. I embodied everything I feared, which became my personality since it was all I knew. Eighth grade is the negativity that I tried to avoid, but I, unfortunately, swallowed it and became the void. Thus, I can understand why Gi escaped while she did. The self-centeredness would have only gotten worse if she had stayed. Gi walked while I ran.

While I can counter my thoughts, the people in my environment most likely saw me as an erratic adolescent since my behavior seemed to change randomly. After all, I consumed media that revolved around being disabled, and I closely saw myself in them since I could barely function in the real world. Other people most likely saw the attitude since I lacked attitude towards work and refused to do things I disliked—Dr. Epstein’s 1973 research on *the looking-glass self-theory* reflects my assumption. Much of my self-concept emerges from the social interactions with others, and I think it applies to everyone, but being naive amplifies his hypothesis (Epstein). Since I stuck onto Gi, I absorbed all of her traits, even if I did not see

conflict stemming from it. My self-concept was vulnerable to those closest to me, and Gi happened to be the seed.

Now friendless, I absorbed myself in my mind and never left. The world is too scary for me to deal with since people are quick to criticize. Who knows what they would say to me? Their words could hurt far worse than Gi's. I could not help but to absorb what people said over the years. Probably none of my opinions are mine; they are a collection of perspectives of others with nothing to own for myself. Sucking up to people and adopting their traits might seem reasonable in the short term, but if you surround yourself with unhealthy people for a long time, you will start acting like them. That happened with Gi and me, although I picked up on her 2016 self while she matured since then.

Being naive led me down a subservient path that seemed to have no end. Autism might play a role in my social ineptness, but I think that it could have been different if I had reached out to other people. They could have been supporting in ways that Gi could not provide. Gi was not a good influence on me, so I harbored many biases against everybody internally. And at the time, she implied that she was the dominant one in our relationship. After all, she did most of the communication between us. I never contributed anything new to the conversation because I feared that she would not like what I had to say. I relied on Gi for most of my views since I saw the world as an overwhelming place with too many variables to understand. I found a guide within Gi, but that does not mean she enjoyed her time with me.

My life seemed brighter before I got intense with Gi, even though I still had problems. My teachers, even if strict, had good intentions: they wanted to better my understanding of the world and apply it to my life. Gi, however, wanted somebody to reaffirm her opinions, even if she had online communities to do so. I had an easier time abiding by the adult demands since

there was a direct impact on my self-journey. Gi did not care if I had opposing opinions; she preferred that I followed her along. Luckily with other people, I found other interests that she did not like but at a loss price.

I was practically a hermit by the time I started high school. Life felt boring since there were no social outlets for me to lean on during the summer. I stopped talking to Gi after realizing I had messed up the relationship. The common denominator would be that we were sad beings with only judgment. It would be hard to maintain relationships if one party needed to criticize the other for being themselves. But if I stayed alone, life would remain in the same drudge that middle school had. There should be a new way of living with new opportunities to explore a new environment. After all, my previous experience had little to offer besides internet scrolling and constant searching for the “right” opinion.

Reality had nothing to do with opinions poured out by anonymous. Unlike the internet, people had an authenticity that I had never noticed before, despite how shallow they appear. Being an outsider made it challenging to relate with people at school, but I blended in and let them talk over me since I had nothing interesting to say. Who would even want to talk about classwork again? Is it painful enough for all of us, let alone discussing it? I was so far out of the loop from teenagers that I failed socially.

Even with all the orientations and introductions to high school, adjusting without Gi did not feel right. The peers felt entirely new since I had neglected their existence for so long. Their idea made me fear that I was boring, and I happened to be correct. But at least the school placed me exactly where I needed to be—the absolute bottom of the barrel. First-year students at my school do not have a respectful reputation, but I felt even below them because I lacked the social skills and intellectual abilities to make a part of them.

Being the void that I was, it was surprising to see that peers and teachers alike actually liked me. But why, since I substitute a social life with tedious work? Why would that make people appreciative of me? In my mind, my newfound work ethic would not impress others since I observed that peers put in less effort but with higher yields.

Although I masked my unhealthy autistic symptoms behind Gi in middle school, they came out again since I did not have somebody to note my idiosyncratic behaviors. My teachers and parents taught me how to behave but never enough in extreme situations. Therefore, I handled change poorly, which high school had plenty to offer me. New people, classes, and extracurriculars all frightened me, but I needed to conquer my fear if I wanted later in life to be breezier.

Unsure of what to do, I chose clubs that seemed exciting or had a community impact. The drama club was not my cup of tea, but I enjoyed painting in the art club. The activities that I spent the most time doing was the various volunteering opportunities. Although I only wanted the hours to look suitable for college, I found enjoyment outside the house and potentially talking to others who seemed similar. Unfortunately, the approximately one hundred hours I spent volunteering at places in my community seem like distant memories since my high school years are cascading, and that coronavirus threatened my ability. Maybe I should become more involved if there are no looming threats involving potential illness. Unfortunately, being self-centered leads me down destructive paths that people can help me avoid.

Whenever unhealthy, my stress manifests itself in various forms at different severities. Since there are four aspects where the tension changes my body, I need to notice where the anxiety originates. A physical manifestation feels significantly different compared to an irritating thought. After all, different situations call for other tactics. For example, when pressure begins or

is relatively mild, I might not notice the pain, but I will feel off. If it gets worse, I am prone to meltdowns that could injure me. At my worst, I will require psychiatric interventions that might seem invasive. But for the most part, I try my best to stabilize.

Although I usually stay within a physical routine, I can experience various changes in my body function and overall health whenever stressed. There is probably a positive correlation between the times I was worried, and my health declined. An obvious example would be the coronavirus, which I took seriously. Afraid that my family would get the virus, I made sure that everybody in my house wore masks whenever possible. Death might have come if we did not take any precautions. However, I mainly stayed sedentary at home since I had nothing to do. Constantly researching its symptoms also did not help since I learned of many who were healthy and died suddenly of the disease. Fearing that it would take me, I dwelled on the possible death and its impact on others. Sixteen years old would be far too soon to die, considering that others lived far longer.

I developed psychosomatic symptoms that mimicked dying. For example, my heart closed up while my breathing labored. These shivers tied me up multiple times out of uncertainty. Without a known panacea, I needed somebody to give me coping strategies. After a chest pain hospital visit, my mother put some apps on my phone that would guide my mind elsewhere. One of them happened to be a digital fidget toy that I played with all day. Although I have had these types of toys before, I typically got bored of them after a while. There were many kinds of fidgets with the app I had, leading me to distract myself from physical stress manifestations. Research on fidget tools from UC Davis Health reaffirms my experience since they improve cognition function in my life along with those with ADHD (Schweitzer). However, the cognitive benefits differ from the research since I needed something to keep out of the ward

while the others increased executive functioning. Nevertheless, my mother truly helped me, even if she simply did a quick Google search.

Bodily functions do not appear out of thin air, and there must be a mind that controls them. Therefore, with psychology studying thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, I must consider each and analyze how they affect me (Merriam-Webster). Every aspect plays a role that becomes easily vulnerable to what I experience. Responses and mechanisms pop up due to life not being smooth. After all, humans are not one-dimensional. My reactions to the same stimuli can differ depending on other variables.

My surroundings and unconscious influence emotions fight to create fuzzy interpretations. And with the inner conflict comes contradiction. When stressed, I struggle to balance between positives and negatives. And usually, the downfalls win because I do not have a stable environment. My family wants to help, while people at school tend to leave me be. Their reactions do not correspond to my regular withdrawal.

Being stressed with social and structural issues, I started having adverse reactions to my environment. Although not the only symptom of anxiety, how I feel plays the most impact on my decisions. The more decisions to make, the more stressed I get, and I can see the distress in school. On a stress survey that I recently completed for psychology, I noted that I had all the changes in emotions and feelings. The ones on the survey were irritability, sadness, worry, tension, and anger. Some happened to be more overwhelming than others. I also indicated that others noticed my signs, especially my hypervigilance (linked to worry and tension). Of course, I must consider that my irritation manifests in other forms.

With my emotional signs, I protect myself and prevent others from coming in and making it worse. With my previous mistrust and fear of conflict, I believe that I should deal with my

problems by myself. My mother knows this well because I quickly get irritated when asked too many questions. Having enough alone time is necessary for me to process my emotions and conclude things. With my mother being an extrovert and me an introvert, she sees less need to be alone. However, I thrive individually, and my time in virtual learning became an example of my relative intellectual independence. Although empathetic about my free time, she gets concerned whenever I do not do anything with my peers. They are not anything like me, and I doubt they would care.

However, I am not a lost soul, far from one. There would be almost no point if I did not have a creative outlet. My most prominent one happens to be drawing, while I also listen to music, podcasts, and various videos online. Literature also seems fascinating since I read and write a lot. Some media I consume more than others, but I do not want much influence from the outside world because it is depressing. I crave a romantic setting where life flows without conflict. Real people, especially my peers, cannot provide that atmosphere. Therefore I search for it myself.

Although I appear temperamental on the surface, I only react to my concept of reality which tailors itself to me. Other people have different perception filters since they have other experiences and beliefs (James). I might forget that others have their biases, but I should not dwell on them because I am unsure how they impact me. Fretting about everybody's reaction makes my anxiety worse; therefore, I need to focus on bettering my mood. After all, my extreme stress moments have led me to the hospital, combined with physical issues. Acting out on others is also expected since I highly expect everybody, and I get sore whenever unfulfilled. Therefore, I would also consider my emotional and physical closely tied since I have pain whenever in a mood and vice versa.

Unfortunately, I get stressed quickly, especially with responsibilities. Having little understanding of peers is not helpful either since they manifest as extremes. I would give them nuance, but I have other priorities that consume my time.

Although entertainment, Spotify became my first outlet. Whenever I wanted, hearing songs I like became escapist compared to listening to people's voices. Although I have thousands of songs and podcasts saved onto my phone, I tend to go back to the same ones. Much of my music is "indie," but I can sprinkle in other genres. It might have been rude to keep myself closed off, but it was out of respect. After all, I needed to tune my emotions away to avoid conflict. Intensifying reality is the last thing that should happen; therefore, I need to keep a balance between the two. The imbalance would cause additional stress that swallows me into intensive psychiatric care.

If you spend time with me, you will notice that my earbuds are constantly in my ears. I want to burst since there is overwhelming stress. However, there are real-life consequences of emotional expressions, including disciplinary action. Being placed in high-pressure situations also does not help since I rely on external coping mechanisms. Fortunately, those events happen to be short and far in between but still impact me. My constant failure with driving is one example since it is difficult to focus on the road, and others have the ability. Failing my driver's test also did not help since they expected me to perfect everything and threatened to take my permit away. I had nothing to occupy my mind without my phone, and I needed to speak up. Irrationally hitting myself and shaking a pole did not solve the problem but only worsened it. Even with immense support from other people, I still doubt their sayings and assume the worst would happen. My test failure only happened to be most impactful; other times did not wound me in the past.

Not using an active strategy prevents me from achieving my highest potential. Being distracted for a short period might feel good, but I never learned to deal with life independently. Music and other media forms are perfect examples since one has to escape their being and relate. I also become more passive, a trend that follows me throughout my teenage years. Fearing that I get into something that consumes patience, I crave stability to soften my life. School often threatens my comfort level, therefore boosting my anxiety. I could fix this problem by expanding my comfort zone, but I would have to unlearn many of my preconceptions, including what Gi told me to believe.

Since I stay within the same energy level, I do not notice how long-term stress manifests in myself. My sleep schedule clocks in at eight hours, and I do not pursue substances. Sex also is not a big deal since I need a deep connection before considering such an act. However, I note how short-term stress manifests itself in panic attacks. Both play a role in my daily functioning, but the extreme moments define how I interact with the world because they create more problems for those around me.

Whenever I notice my stress symptoms, my primary instinct is to go onto my phone. Whether it is Spotify, my web browser, or YouTube, the answer is somewhere. After all, there are almost eight billion different perspectives in this world, and at least one has to comfort me (Worldometer). It is easier to find gurus who have the remedy than relying on myself, possibly ending in chaos. Strangers in this context do not matter since I want what is best for myself. Morals cease to be whenever pushed over my limits, but that does not mean I do not get in trouble. It is a sign that I need to find self-motivation and quit relying on others. Even if I seek the effortless path, I am still vulnerable to becoming lazier mentally and physically. My sedentary mechanisms led me to health problems that become harder to fight daily (Lohmann).

But when I need something to boost me up, thinking ahead does not come to mind. Sometimes I do not know if life exists around me, even if they placed the expectations on me. After all, being under immense stress triggers my fight or flight instincts, and there is no time to take no action.

All of these thoughts and experiences lead up to writing this paper. Even though my mind is relatively organized with remembering, I never fully understood how significant points in my life influence my behavior. And even if one thing changed within my life, interacting with the world around me would be unfamiliar. My autistic cognition affects my blank state due to its early manifestation. Since everybody around me told me that I struggled with the disorder, I unintentionally found my behavior fit the diagnostic mold. Autism also plays a role by focusing on one perspective. Throughout my life, I swang towards extremes that required intense concentration. And with depth came my unnerving loyalty towards people and ideas.

Gi happened to install most of my opinions, even if we last interacted years ago. I had to comply if I did not want to lose everything. But absorbing Gi's personality made loss closer to reality. My compliance eventually bled into my thoughts, with constant reminders that I had to be like other people, especially those Gi liked. Schooling only boosted this attitude, and I struggle to make decisions without others. Simultaneously being weak and lonely makes me fear that my previous relationship with Gi has shaped my interactions today too much. I do not want somebody to reject me for being myself, and with autism, I cannot read their intentions. Automatically jumping to the negative makes me believe they would all hate me; therefore, I see that trying is not worth the struggle. But with my future, I can realize that I have control over my mind and pursue what seems fascinating. Being stuck in a rut is temporary; what will last is my perseverance towards adversity. Negativity will not define me.

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